The Anthropology of Ostentation

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What is Tabaruj?

In modern Persian and Arabic, the word "tabarruj" is usually understood to mean women's self-adornment, self-display, or showing off their jewelry. This meaning, although established in legal texts, is only one of the word's later layers. Etymologically, "tabarruj" is derived from the root **b-r-j**, the same root from which words such as burj, buruj, and burj-i-falak are also derived. A minaret, before it is a tall structure, is something that is separated from its context and appears on the horizon: a minaret is not just height; it is the removal of concealment[1] . Therefore, tabarraj cannot be reduced merely to the adornment of the body or the display of jewelry. Tabaruj, in its most fundamental sense, is an event in which something separates from its context to become the focus of vision. What is tabaruj is not necessarily more beautiful, larger, or different; rather, it is simply placed in a position where it can be seen. Tabaruj, before it is a characteristic of an object, is a relationship between that object and the field of vision.

Now, if conspicuousness is a relationship, then no object, body, or garment can be considered inherently conspicuous. A garment might, in one cultural field, be completely dissolved into its context and serve a camouflaging function, but in another field, it could become a tower of spectacle: what has changed is not the object itself, but the configuration of the symbolic field in which the object appears.

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[1]This article is a continuation of the preceding article, namely *The Spider-Spy: The Cough that is Less than a Cough*: An attempt to rethink metaphor, metonymy, and boundary-making, not as rhetorical devices but as modes of crossing between symbolic fields. There, the spider that, by imitating the ant, enters its domain becomes a model for understanding concealment, individuation, and the transformation of position. The present article transfers that same question from the realm of biological camouflage to that of cultural visibility. If the spider, by crossing the boundary between two species, became a being "less than a spider," here that very covering, by crossing the boundary between two symbolic fields, transforms from concealment to ostentation and from ostentation back to concealment. Thus, this article bears the name pupilloscopy: a project that seeks to understand the value, meaning, and visibility of a thing through a topological study of the relationships that surround it.

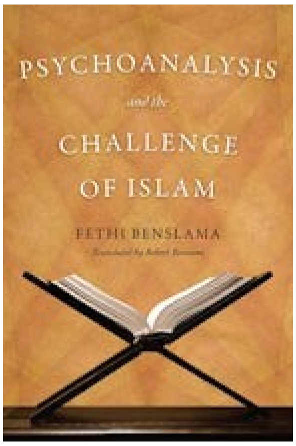
Esmaeilpour Ghoochani, I. (2023). *The Spider-Spy: The Cough that is Less than a Cough: AOM, KON... the Primordial Sounds and Their Relationship to the Sound Worlds as a Wound on the Body of the Word*. Mardomkavi Papers, No. 1.

If the hijab is the negation of *tabarruj*, how is it that the very same hijab, without the slightest change to its own substance, becomes one of the most prominent examples of *tabarruj* on the streets of Paris or Berlin? This question, at first glance, seems to be a political or sociological contradiction, but in reality, it pertains to a more fundamental level. The issue is not Islam, nor the hijab, nor the woman, nor even the relationship between East and West. As has been stated, the issue is how a single object, while preserving all of its material characteristics, can acquire two completely opposite symbolic values. If nothing within the object itself has changed, then the source of this transformation must be sought somewhere outside the object. It is this "outside" that is the subject of this article.

Whatever you measure, that is what you get.

The price you pay will be this or that.

The discussion of *tabaruj* is usually already trapped within a moral or jurisprudential framework. *Tabaruj* is understood either as an individual sin, a form of political resistance, or as the right to bodily choice. Each of these readings, despite their differences, shares a common assumption: It is as if tabaruj is a quality inherent in the body itself or in the garment itself. In this view, sometimes the clothing is the source of tabaruj, sometimes the body, and sometimes the subject's intention. But perhaps the issue stems from somewhere else.



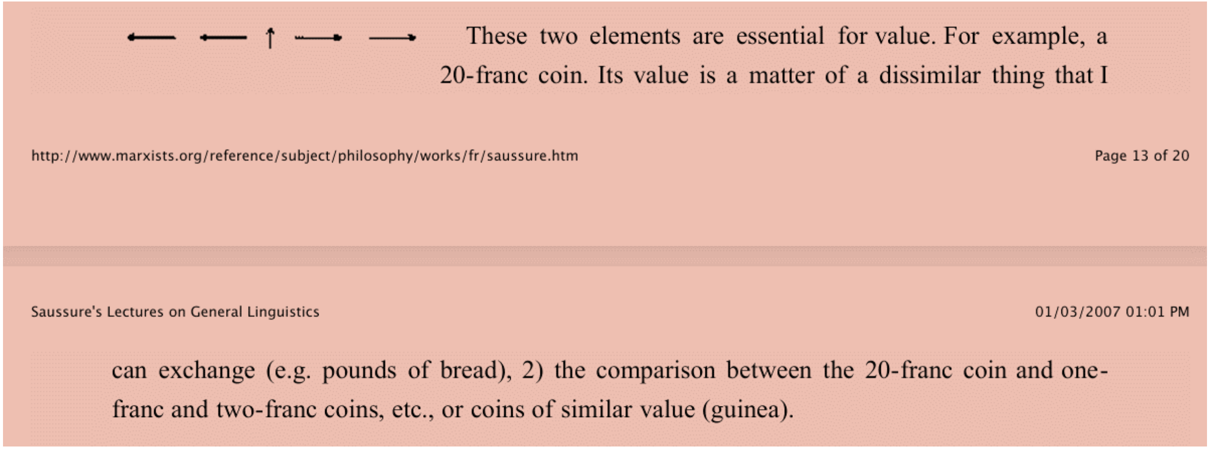
[2] Fathi bin Salama, in his etymological re-reading of the word "tabaruj," draws attention to a point that has been marginalized in many jurisprudential and ethical interpretations. "Tabarruj" comes from the root "burj," the same root that gives us the word for a city tower, a watchtower, or the constellations.For something to stand out, there must be a context from which it can emerge. If everything is prominent, then nothing is prominent. Therefore, from the very beginning, the concept of *tabarruj* is a relational one. What is *mutarajjih* is not simply something that is seen, but something whose relationship to its context is different.

This brings us to a problem that, in my opinion, cannot be properly understood without returning to Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of value. To explain value, he gives the simple example of a twenty-franc coin. The value of this coin, on the one hand, depends on what it can be exchanged for; for example, a certain number of loaves of bread. But this is only half

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[2] Benslama, F. (2009). *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam* (R. Bononno, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.

the story. The same coin, at the same time, is also situated within a network of other coins: one franc, two francs, five francs, and so on. If this network did not exist, one could no longer speak of "value." Therefore, value arises not from an object's relationship with the world, but from the intersection of two types of relationships: a relationship with something outside the system and a relationship with the things that coexist within it[3] .


These two elements are essential for value. For example, a 20-franc coin. Its value is a matter of a dissimilar thing that I

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can exchange (e.g. pounds of bread), 2) the comparison between the 20-franc coin and one-franc and two-franc coins, etc., or coins of similar value (guinea).

Saussure, on this basis, emphasizes that no word can be understood by looking at itself. A word must be read from the outside, through its coexisting words. His example of *sheep* and *mouton* is precisely to demonstrate this point. Both words refer to the same animal, but they do not have the same , because in English there is another word, *mutton*, that separates the meat from the animal itself, whereas in French, *mouton* covers both domains. Therefore, what changes is not the animal; it is the network that has formed around the word. Value is always determined from the outside.

[3] Saussure, F. de. (1910–1911/1993). *Third Course of Lectures on General Linguistics* (student notes). Oxford: Pergamon Press. Reproduced from *Saussure's Lectures on General Linguistics.* https://www.sholetteseminars.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Saussure.GeneralLinguistics..pdf

Why is that? The value depends on something outside.

If you take on the other hand a simple lexical fact, any word such as, I suppose, *mouton* - *mutton,* it doesn't have the same value as *sheep* in English. For if you speak of the animal on the hoof and not on the table, you say *sheep.*

It is the presence in the language of a second term that limits the value attributable to *sheep.*

mutton / *sheep* / *mouton* (Restrictive example.)

So the | arrow is not enough. The <- -> arrows must always be taken into account.

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If the value of a word cannot be found in itself, why should we search for the value of a cultural object in itself? The hijab, too, like a word, is situated within a network of other objects, other bodies, other laws, other memories, and other gazes. What is "modesty" and "modesty" in Tehran is garish in Paris; the fabric hasn't changed, but its network of association has. The symbolic value of the hijab, like the value of the word "*sheep*," lies not in its essence but in its associations.

What is happening here is not merely the transfer of a principle from linguistics to anthropology. If it were, this article would be nothing more than a new application of Saussure's theory. The issue is deeper than that. In language, words are neighbors to one another; but in culture, the neighbors of an object are not only other objects. A cultural object lives among heterogeneous layers: historical memories, bodies, laws, myths, images, desires, fears, rituals, and technologies. For this reason, the cultural value of an object is far more complex than the value of a word. Hijab is not defined solely by its absence; it also enters into a relationship with the mosque, school, street, camera, law, family, media, migration, colonialism, the memory of the revolution, the image of the Muslim woman in Western media, and dozens of other elements. If Saussure reads the word through its neighboring words, ethnography is compelled to read the object through the entire heterogeneous field that surrounds it. For this reason, the metaphor of language, while illuminating, is not sufficient. Language is a network of differences, but culture is not just a network of differences; culture is also a network of adjacencies. Objects do not just acquire meaning because they differ from one another, but because they are placed next to each other, they affect one another, contaminate one another, limit one another, and sometimes transform one another's value. Saussure himself, in his discussion of 'decrepit,' points to how the adjacency of a word's uses can change its value.

A similar example can be seen in the word decrepit ("worn, dilapidated"). How is it that both a decrepit old man and a dilapidated wall have such similar meanings? Where does this similarity come from? Saussure answers: from the influence of the neighboring word. What happens for decrepit in the case of the old man is derived from its coexistence with

decrepit in the case of the wall. This is an example of the contagion of meaning.

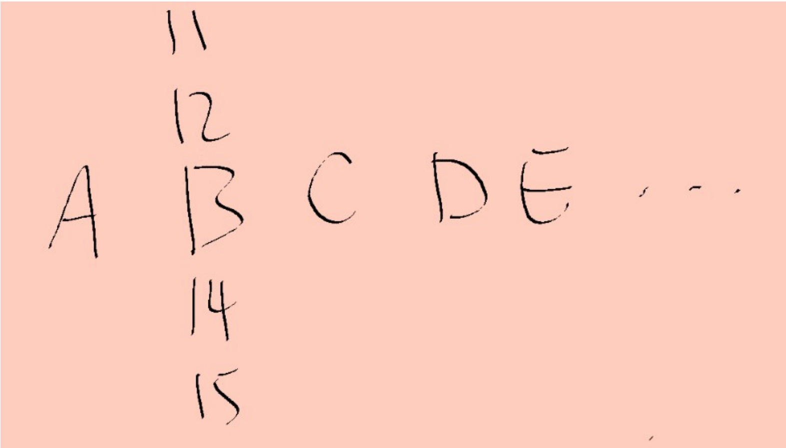
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> Something similar in the example of *decrepit.*
>
> How does it come about that an old man who is *decrepit* and a wall that is *decrepit* have a similar sense?
>
> It is the influence of the neighbouring word. What happens to *decrepit* (an old man) comes from the coexistence of the neighbouring term *decrepit* (a wall).
>
> Example of contagion.

What is attributed to the decrepit wall gradually infects the decrepit old man as well, and vice versa. Meaning does not live within the word, but in its contacts. One might say that culture is the extension of this very principle to the realm of things; where objects, like words, produce meaning in proximity to one another.

Words that are placed next to each other phonetically, even without a etymological connection, can be linked together in a network of semantic association and contagion. From this perspective, phonetic similarity is not merely a linguistic game, but one of the fundamental mechanisms of cultural formation. Culture, from this perspective, is not a collection of individual signifiers, but a self-organizing network of phonetic correspondences, associations, and symbolic contagion.

If that is the case, the example of the hijab is no longer a strange exception but an outstanding example of this very logic. Imagine a woman wearing the same clothes, the same color scarf, the same shoes, and walking in the same way crossing a country's border alone. If the value lay in the garment itself, nothing should change. But in reality, everything changes. The very object that was barely noticed on one side of the border becomes, on the other side, the first thing to catch the eye. This transformation can be explained neither by individual psychology, nor by the aesthetics of the garment, nor by theology. The only thing that has changed is the configuration of the relationships within which that object is situated. Exhibitionism is the result of a shift in the field of relations. A flag, a dome, a cross, a turban, a kaffiyeh, a tie, or even an algorithm can become ostentatious under certain conditions, because exhibitionism is not a property of objects; it is a property of the position in which objects are placed. No object is inherently sacred, inherently trivial, inherently ostentatious, or inherently concealed. Every object derives its value from the field in which it appears, just as every word derives its value from the

words that flank it. The word "bitter" next to "tongue" forms "bitter tongue," and next to "coffee," "bitter coffee."



In Saussure's reading, each signifier derives its value from its difference from neighboring signifiers in a chain (A, B, C, D...). As we saw, he also emphasized the vertical dimension (11, 12, 13, 14,...). This is the path Derrida pursued with his discussion of the distinction between the difference "differ" and the deferral "defer." Note that when a signifier **slips** out of its own chain and enters another, in this transfer the signifier does not merely acquire a new meaning but enters **an** entirely different **world**.

This situation can be compared to the phenomenon **of camouflage** in nature. A spider that mimics the appearance of an ant is biologically still a spider, but functionally it lives in the world of ants:



Fig. 4. The spider "*Aphantochilus rogersi*" (*Thomisidae*) with its prey, a "*Cephalotes*" worker. Photo by Gil Wizen S. The spider, by holding two legs up, is able to deceive the ants and gain entry into their colony, blurring the boundary between the two species. This can be seen as a form of metonymy, where the spider's legs are standing in for its entire body, and as a form of metaphor, where the spider as a whole is taking on the identity of the ants in order to gain access to their space.

)See the previous article: *The Spider-Spy: The Cough that is Less than a Cough*). The ant-mimicking spider, by raising its front legs, transforms them into ant antennae. Its body is biologically still that of a spider, but in the perceptual field of ants, it takes on a different function. The leg is a "spider's leg" in one chain and an "ant's antenna" in another. A single organ is read in two different systems. The similarity here is not merely a covering of difference; it is a way of crossing the border and living in two fields. The spider neither becomes an ant entirely nor simply remains a

spider; at the intersection of the two systems, the being becomes biconic. Like the letter B≃13 in the previous figure.

The hijab also has such a dual existence. In an Islamic setting, it may be part of the background: a covering for modesty that, precisely because it is so widespread, goes largely unnoticed. But that same covering, in many European environments, without any change in its material or form, stands out from the background and draws the eye. Here, the hijab does not lose its connection to modesty and decency, but at the same time, in another chain of associations, it becomes a signifier of Islam, migration, cultural difference, politics, identity, and sometimes resistance. This transformation is not merely a "different meaning"; it is the convergence of two symbolic fields in a single form. For this reason, the function of the hijab in Europe can approach *tabarruj*—not in its sexual or moral sense, but in the more fundamental sense of being conspicuous, of breaking from concealment, and of emerging from the background. The very fabric that was meant to deflect the gaze now calls it to itself. What was used for *stur*t, without any change in the wearer's intent, becomes a tower of spectacle. Here, *tabarruj* is not the act of an individual, but an event of the field.

Just as a spider's leg is a leg in its own world and an antenna in the ant's realm, the veil too is concealment in one domain and prominence in another. The object remains the same, yet through two different systems it operates in two distinct ways.

Metaphor is the concealment of language, and concealment is nature's metaphor; both make it possible to live in another world, in another form.